

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

C: Second Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 12
Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8:26-39

19 June 2022
Salem, Bridgeport

“Free at Last”

We just heard a reading from Paul’s letter to the Galatians, but it would have been an entirely different experience if Paul had been here speaking in person.

First of all, we weren’t hearing Paul speaking in person;
we were listening to the reading of a letter.

Second, the letter has been translated from Greek to English
in a way that smoothes out the rough language,
making it sound less offensive and more acceptable.

Third, the lector was just reading it, not acting it out.

But to set this passage in context, we need to understand what Paul was feeling.

And what Paul was feeling was anger.

Just in case it isn’t clear that Paul was angry when he wrote this,

let me read you the first part of chapter 3.

“You foolish people! Who has bewitched you?

It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!

The only thing I want to learn from you is this:

Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard?

Are you so foolish?

Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?

Did you experience so much for nothing?—if it really was for nothing.

Well then, does God supply you with the Spirit and work miracles among you

by your doing the works of the law, or by your believing what you heard?”

And later on in the letter he says he wishes that those who have bewitched them
would go castrate themselves!

Paul is angry, furious, enraged, livid!

He had poured himself into founding this new church in Galatia.

He had left them with a solid foundation, on good footing, set to grow and thrive.

But his successors have completely turn things around.

To understand what’s going on, we need to remind ourselves when this all took place –
just years after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

There wasn’t an established organized Christian religion yet;

there was Jews who followed Jesus.

Jesus, after all, was a Jew. He grew up as part of the Jewish people. He was a Jewish rabbi.

And he came to be seen as the long awaited Messiah of the Jews, the chosen people of God.

Yes, he was more than that, but first and foremost he was the Savior of the Jews.

And so followers of Jesus were basically a reform movement within Judaism

or kind of a new sect to add to those others that already existed –

the Pharisees and Sadducees and the Essenes and Zealots.

So these successors of Paul weren't doing anything outrageous;
they were simply living as Jews who followed Jesus.
And so when Gentiles came into the congregation
they were expected to conform to the ways Jews had always lived and worshipped.

But Paul says,
No! Gentiles should not have to become Jews first
because following Jesus was completely different from being a Jew.

But you can see why Paul had such an uphill battle to fight.
If they were supposed to throw out the law and their traditions and their rituals
and everything that defined their identity then what would they have left?
It's not like they could leave the temple and join a Christian church like people can do today.
If they threw out circumcision, & dietary laws, & cleanliness laws, & Sabbath & festival laws,
they'd be throwing out the very things that defined and identified them
as descendants of Abraham.

How could they throw out the law when that's what their holy scripture was called?
If you throw out the Law, you throw out the heart of Hebrew Scripture,
and then what would you have left? Nothing.

It would be like Jesus showing up again to us and telling us that there was a new way to live
and we had to get rid of everything that we knew –
that we had to jettison our scriptures and our traditions and our rituals and our theology
and our liturgy and our hymnody
and everything else that identifies us as Lutherans,
because we weren't supposed to be Lutherans anymore,
we were supposed to be something new.

That's what it was like for those Jews who had become Christian.
They were being asked to throw out everything that they held dear, everything that they valued,
everything that made them who they were.
To get rid of the Law meant getting rid of everything.
So you can understand why Paul's successors were holding on to what they knew.

But it's interesting the way Paul deals with these people who want to keep the law.
He doesn't do it the way Peter or James or John might do it.
If I were one of the disciples
and people were talking about how important it was to keep the law,
I would point out that Jesus kept breaking the law.
Time and time again Jesus broke the Law, and in the end it got him killed.

Bud Paul doesn't talk about what Jesus did
because Paul didn't know Jesus when he walked the earth.
Paul didn't spend three years hanging out with Jesus and seeing Jesus break all of the laws.

Paul had spent his life keeping the law.

He loved the law, he was committed to the law, he was an expert on the law,

he was zealous for the law, he persecuted people for breaking the law, he even killed them.

And then Jesus met him on the road to Damascus

and amidst a literally blinding light and a thunderous roar, Saul heard the words,

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

And in that moment Paul’s life was transformed.

He was set free from his bondage to the law, and instead became bound in love to Jesus.

And so for Paul, when someone was trying to stick to the law,

Paul knew better than anyone else that that was the way to death, not life.

Paul’s life had been completely, totally, absolutely turned upside down.

He had been like that deranged man in our gospel today

who was living in a cemetery among the dead, bound up in chains,

and cut off from any kind of loving, supporting community.

He was out of his mind, dangerous, feared.

When Paul was Saul, he probably didn’t see himself

the way he would have seen that deranged man, but that’s how others saw him.

And we, too, are in some ways very much like that man.

We, too, are bound and chained, not just by obviously sinful acts,

but by our need to hold onto all the laws and traditions and rituals and routines

and values and theology and liturgy and hymnody

and everything else that defines and identifies us as being different from others.

But the point Paul is making is that Christ has come to set us free from all of those things

so that our identity is no longer in our Lutheranism, or our northern European heritage,

or in our socio-economic class, or in anything except our relationship to Christ.

We are like that man in the gospel who was in need of healing,

and we are also like those people Paul was yelling at

who were so in need of letting go of their past.

But the good news is that Christ does come,

and when we have an encounter like that man chained among the tombs had,

or like Saul on the road to Damascus had, then Christ will totally transform our lives.

Now does that mean that we will never sin again? Of course not.

Paul certainly wasn’t perfect.

Here in Galatians he says there is no male or female, that they are one in Christ,

that they shouldn’t be treated differently,

but in another letter Paul’s words that women should be silent in the church

have been used for 2000 years to silence women

and to prohibit them from serving as pastors and in other capacities.

Here in Galatians Paul says there should be no slave and free, but they are one in Christ,

that there should be no hierarchy between them,

and yet in his letter to Philemon he does nothing to dismantle slavery

but is complicit with the institution and maintains the status quo.

When we have an encounter with the living Christ like the man in the tombs and like Paul,
then our hearts and minds will also be radically transformed.

That doesn't mean we will be perfect, because we are still in bondage to sin
and cannot free ourselves.

But despite our faults and failures and fears, we can never go back to the way we were.

The man in the tombs would never be the same.

His life, his purpose, his mission were forever changed.

And the same is true for Paul.

His life, his purpose, his mission were forever changed.

Jesus comes to set us free

but in order to be set free we have to let go of everything else except Jesus.

And when we let go of everything except Jesus we will find that Jesus is all we need.

May the transforming power of the Spirit

transform your heart and mind and body and soul from this day on, forever more. Amen